Gender Ego: Comparative Models of Transgender Identity Acquisition

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Abstract

Since many individuals continue to explore their conceptual selves throughout their adult lives, identity acquisition is by no means a chronologically linear struggle. Though evident in the heterosexual cisgender populace, identity acquisition is a key issue for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals, and especially for gender-variant individuals contending with restrictive socio-schemas. In order to normalize and demystify transgender emergence, this essay critically compares development stage models of gender-variance (Lewins, 1995; Rachlin, 1997; Ekins, 1997; Lev, 2004) with Habermas’ (1979) psycho-social stages of ego development.

Introduction

Upon review of the research (Benjamin, 1966; Stoller, 1968; Green 1974, 1987; Kessler & Meckenna, 1978; Money & Erhardt, 1982), it becomes clear that medical models do not consider transgender individuals within their own developmental parameters, but as deviations from normative cisgender development (Gamson, 1995; Cole & Meyere III, 1998). The overwhelming desire to explain gender-variance as a phenomena eclipsed the research of developmental acquisition for decades to such extent that self-identified cross-dressers and sex-changers were “never explored as social constructs of reality with their own legitimacy” (Ekins, 1997).

Imposed labels attempted to differentiate Primary and Secondary as well as Classical and Non-Classical types of transsexuals based on age of development, erotic target location, autoerotic trans-genital fantasy, cross-dressing behavior, and gender envy (Docter, 1988; Blanchard, 1989; Veale et. al., 2010). While adaptive and maladaptive defense mechanisms are crucial in the development of an individual’s gender identity, the ability to make sweeping inferences based on circumstantial case studies relies too heavily on the researcher’s preconceived notions of gender, not to mention the poor vocabulary of the subject. In short, there are too many variables to delineate a Classical from a Non-Classical transsexual, let alone Cross-Dressers from Drag Artists, unless one subjects the trans community to a normalized, cultural standard and a static concept of gender. It is empirically possible to defend such a standard, and even infer correlations, in the same way that it is possible to statistically defend certain stereotypes, but the very subject is far too personal for universal causality.

Furthermore, an individual’s transgender identity can exist as an additional construct wholly inclusive of their general identity, completely separate from their general identity, or entirely eclipsing of their general identity. In other words, the acceptance of one’s gender-variance can be as trite for some as it can be wholly transformational for others and can occur either in sync or out of sync with adolescent growth.

As an umbrella term, the Transgender label encompasses a range of gender-variant types, including post-op and pre-op male-to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, transvestites, casual genderqueers, alternating pangender individuals, ambi-gender androgynes, and agender individuals who strive to nullify gender expression. For some, such identities may even explore cultural and spiritual realms including the Two Spirit philosophies of Native America, and indigenous third gender concepts including the Māhū in Hawai’i, the Fakaleiti in Tonga, the Fa’afafine in Samoa, the Kathoey in Thailand, and the Hijra in India (Matzner, 2001). Indeed, the trans in Transgender refers to any and all who transform, transcend or transmute gender.

However, regardless of the age of gender emergence or the cultural variations that occur, there are a few key stages gender-variant individuals experience which are as elementary as Habermas’ psycho-social phases of ego development. Habermas (1979) broke the human experience into four key stages: Symbiotic, Egocentric, Sociocentric and Universalistic, and just as Minton and Mcdonald (1989) unified and compared the models of homosexual identity acquisition, it’s possible to observe similarities in transgender identity acquisition amongst the works of Lewins (1995), Ekins (1997), Rachlin (1997) and Lev (2004) (See: Table 1).

Table 1
Theoretical Stages of Transgender Identity Formation Compared to Habermas’ Stages of Ego Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Habermas</th>
<th>Lev</th>
<th>Lewins</th>
<th>Ekins</th>
<th>Rachlin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Symbiotic (Lack of Identity)</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Distress and Confusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Egocentric (Racial Identity)</td>
<td>Seeking</td>
<td>Introspection</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Beginning Male Fertilizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sociocentric (Role Identity)</td>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Identity and Self Labeling</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Universalistic (Ego Identity)</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Surgical Realignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21
Symbiotic

In Habermas’ (1979) original definition, the infantile symbiotic stage has no identity. Yet in this context one can observe the cognitive dissonance experienced by some transgender individuals prior to acquiring their identity. The question remains: at what point does one become aware of their gender-variance? The symbiotic stage does not, therefore, apply to all transgender individuals given that some report awareness of their gender as infants. Rather, the symbiotic stage is more applicable for those who first attempt a cisgender life and transition later.

This first gender identity, discarded in later development may be deemed a “false self,” though the extent of this falsification is unclear and depends on the level of integration gender plays in the individual’s core foundation (Winnicott, 1965). Lewin’s model (1995), for example, begins with a stage of intense Anxiety echoed by Rachlin’s (1997) first stage of Distress and Confusion. Likewise, Lev’s (2004) initial stage of Awareness is often accompanied by a great deal of distress as the gender-variant individual copes with the very idea of who they are. If the individual remains in the symbiotic stage they may describe themselves as “weird” or “different” without knowing how or in what way. As they progress into the egocentric stage, the truth of their situation progressively reveals itself.

In MTF case studies, Ekins (1997) observed various forms of “masked” awareness, including closed, suspicious, open and pretence, depending on whether or not the individual is closed off to the idea, suspicious of some gender non-conformity, open to the idea, or wholly committed.

Egocentric

During Habermas’ (1979) Egocentric stage an individual is self-oriented, implying that the individual is just beginning to formulate their understanding of self, and like a child, hasn’t developed the vocabulary, understanding or social miens to fully actualize their identity. In Ekins’ (1997) awkwardly phrased stage model for MTF transsexuals, the egocentric stage is marked by the process of Beginning Male Femaling, and Fantasying Male Femaling. While including Blanchard’s (1989) notion of self-aroused autogynephilia, these fantasies exceed eroticism since such fantasies cover the interrelationship “between three modes of femaling—body demaling, gender femaling and erotic femaling (3MF) and the interrelations between sex, sexuality and gender (SSG)”(Ekins, 1997).

Additionally, the Egocentric stage can be clearly marked in Lewins’ (1995) stage of Discovery, while Rachlin’s (1997) stage begins the arduous journey of Self Definition in order to Define Options, an experience described in common by Lev’s (2004) Seeking Information stage. As the gender-variant construct begins to form, the desire to Reach Out becomes even more prevalent as the individual begins to experience an increased sense of isolation (Lev, 2004).

Sociocentric

The Sociocentric stage is marked, in this context, by many levels of experimentation, disclosure and social interactions. During the Purging and Delay process, transsexuals may continue to experiment with their image, accruing clothes and makeup and styles they periodically shed in order to find their true identity (Lewins, 1995; Ekins, 1997).

Some may “come out” entirely. Others may experiment with different modes of self-labeling, including experimentation with names. It’s during this stage one can readily observe the social scripts built from an individual’s interaction with a hetero-normative majority. Patience, temperament, esteem, perception of self, and even vocabulary can all be influenced by both heterosexist and cisgender bias (Cox and Gallois, 1996; Mascher, 2003). Because of this, self-labeling as a tool of LGBTQ identity acquisition goes beyond simple stage models of the coming out process by including both defense mechanisms and ideological delineations in reaction to a potentially oppressive majority (Rust, 1996; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Butler, 1990).

It’s at this stage that, if they have not already done so, the individual can thoroughly explore the many variations of gender, adhering to or breaking from gender stereotypes. In 1973, Kando tried to establish a correlation between stereotypical behavior and women, yet further research indicates that trans-women tend to break from traditional western gender schemas, rejecting the hyper-feminine role in favor of feminism (Bolin, 1988; Feinbloom, 1976).

For many, social experimentation is an ongoing process, especially for gender-queer and pangender individuals who may shift periodically between genders. Returning to Lev’s (2004) developmental model, Transitional Exploration may include body modification, hormone regimens and a complete overhaul of the physical self. Conceptually, Lev’s (2004) fifth stage may seem like a “make it or break it” point when transsexuals decide to “complete the process” or not. However, it is important to question what “completion” means to the individual, and how comfortable they are with their own anatomy.

For example, some MTFs may reject the transsexual label altogether, having always perceived themselves as women. Others, however, may identify strongly with the transsexual label, and may hold onto this identity long after their sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), or may in fact never undergo SRS at all, preferring the MTF, Ambigender, Pangender, Third Gender, or perhaps even Shemale identity construct.

Furthermore, gender-variant individuals in this stage are now capable of exploring the interrelationship of sex, gender and sexual orientation, allowing for once
heterosexual males to become lesbians, and once self-identified lesbians to become heterosexual men. In collected data, transvestites and cross-dresers primarily identified as heterosexual (Bullough & Bullough, 1997; Docter & Fleming, 2001; Docter & Prince, 1997), though one must question the validity of such research and its targeted sample population, as well as the rigidity of the terminology used.

According to Bem’s (1998, 2000) Exotic Becomes Erotic model, males who associate with females and feminine activities will be “more likely to view males as exotic, and later develop a sexual orientation towards them” (Veale et al., 2010). To test this, a study performed by Taylor and Rupp (2004) found that the majority of drag performers (female impersonators) were homosexual while FTM transsexuals reported a primary attraction to women (Chivers & Bailey, 2000; Devor, 1993; Okabe et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2005). While this potentially validates certain aspects of Bem’s hypothesis, the model remains fundamentally flawed since it does not account for the sexual development of homosexual boys who associate and play with boys, or homosexual girls who associate and play with girls.

To expand the sexual horizon, research performed on MTF transsexuals observed an equal division between androphiles, gynephiles, bisexuals and asexuals (Blanchard, 1989; Freund, Steiner & Chan, 1982: Johnson & Hunt, 1990; Lawrence, 2003). One could theorize that individuals who never fit in with either boys or girls, or adapted well to both simultaneously, may be equally alienated and fascinated by both sexes resulting in pangender, pansexual and bisexual identities outside the Bem’s binary scope.

**Universalistic**

By definition, Habermas’ (1979) Universalistic ego grasps how the individual’s framework fits within the world. In this context, gender-variant individuals have now created their identity as a foundation and are building further to create a more dynamic sense of self.

Once again, Lewins’ (1995) perspective relates the preoccupation with SRS as a remedy, after which Lewins describes a final stage of Invisibility whereby individuals may hide or even erase any history of ever being male. This invisibility could result from an adaptive release of the past or a maladaptive shame of it, though Lewins does not postulate on this nor relate the consequences of living as a gender-variant individual in a cisgender world.

Rachlin (1997) deemphasized surgery in favor of a far more personalized development of self, underlined by a strong counselor-client relationship. Rachlin’s (1997) key point and final stage was not to eradicate the past, to hide the origin, or to camouflage the self, but rather to remove one’s gender identity as the defining characteristic of the psyche. Many gender-variant individuals, after being consumed by the issue for so long, often feel lost towards the end of their developmental process and may require new, expressive formats to develop a truly multifaceted and well-rounded identity.

Having Constituted and Consolidated a female identity, Ekins’ (1997) MTF case studies dealt with the incongruence of past and present with three adaptive techniques; Aparting from the past entirely, Substituting the story altogether, or Integrating the past into a healthy evolution.

Lev’s (2004) last stage of Integration is a process similar to Cass’ (1979, 1984, 1990) Identity Synthesis. Having transformed and adapted to their new physical self, perceived identity, and cognitive viewpoint, the gender-variant individual progresses back into everyday life, however that may exist for them.

For some, the final step may be to make the whole process a non-issue by letting go of the past; for others it may already be a non-issue, not by forgetting their experiences but by including themselves with the rest of the community, thereby reducing the sense of alienation. For even more still, they may maintain a positive transgender identity as a means to bolster the LGBTQ community as a whole, or merely to respect their own life journey.

**Conclusion**

Considering the fecundity of human behavior, not to mention our limitless imagination, the means by which people express their personal identities is limitless. Empirically, researchers can quantify the most common routes of human experience, yet when dealing with mold-breaking minorities and sub-minorities, we find ourselves amongst the wonderful outliers rarely accounted for. Diversity is not to be underestimated, and while categories are useful they must be taken lightly.

Theories regarding causal inference span epigenetic and biological factors, personal exploration, exposure, lack of exposure, as well as the empowering or oppressive use of socio-cultural norms. How powerful these variables are remains unclear, yet at some point in their life-span, gender-variant individuals begin to realize their difference from the assumed majority.

Often, individuals will seek external help to guide them through their internal dilemmas, and those in rural areas where the LGBTQ community may be sparse or absent may feel isolated, even if they are entirely accepting of themselves. Because of this it is crucial for prospective counselors, teachers, moderators and members of the community who counsel LGBTQ individuals to understand not only the nature of the developmental process, but also the diverse variety of conceptual identities one’s sexuality and gender may express.

To give the American Psychological Association their due, the future of gender-variant research emphasizes the experience of gender dysphoria over the pathology of gender disorder (American Psychiatric
Association, 2011). For, in the end, our emphasis should not be on the progression of male to female, female to male, straight to gay, or even gay to straight, but rather from self to actualized self, whatever that may look like, and no more.

Works Cited


